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A Dialectical View of Prague

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Explanatory Note

This paper was written, at the invitation of Alessandro Ferrara, to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the *Prague Conference Philosophy and Social Science*, where each year critical theorists from around the world come together to discuss their research. The founder of the event, originally situated in Dubrovnik, was Jürgen Habermas, and today's directors include Amy Allen, Bill Scheuermann, María Pía Lara, Rainer Forst, Alessandro Ferrara and others.

There are more than 30 contributions to this issue of *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, most of them from people who have attended many more times than myself. The full Table of Contents is here:

<http://journals.sagepub.com/toc/pscb/43/3>

To understand what's special about the Prague Colloquium, we require a bit of dialectical imagination.

So, picture this (thesis): you attend a family reunion, with all the usual excitement, and a little bit of trepidation. Various grandparents from different branches of your big family ceremoniously hold court and affectionately welcome their children and grandchildren. Some share their love in the spirit of equality; others, perhaps a bit brusquely, but more honestly, pick out their favourites and shower them with special attention. This year, cousin Q brought a friend with him; a newcomer and a bit of an outsider, true, but one who both enjoys herself and mingles well with the old guard. She'll probably be adopted by the end of the reunion and join the get-together again next year.

In the corner of your eye, you notice an argument developing, first at a low level, but getting increasingly more intense. It's uncle R and aunt S again, rehearsing, with even more verve than last year, their old disagreement about that important inheritance, a question that ultimately affects us all, but which many of us prefer to ignore. Their dispute revolves around a few crucial passages that are so difficult to decipher that no one knows for sure how to arrive at the correct interpretation. Some of the older family members hurry to reconcile the adversaries by playing down their differences – "We belong to the same tribe, after all!" – but the kids simply snicker and watch with glee as the yearly argument unravels along well-established lines.

Next (antithesis) imagine you enter a drab conference room, fully prepared to give your paper. You nervously shuffle your notes around, cautiously lift your eyes, and suddenly grasp, with a mix of incredulity and horror, that all the authors you have been studiously quoting, objecting to, even attacking, are *there with you in the room*. Extraordinarily, some of them sit less than an arm's length away. They encouragingly, yet impatiently nod at you, waiting for your presentation to begin.

Your first gut reaction is obvious: run away and never turn back! But then you recognize, in the very last row, the one author you have admired your whole scholarly life, whose thoughts have accompanied, and indeed guided you through endless

conversations. She just sits there and expects your first sentence. You suddenly realize that running won't get you very far, and stammer away.

Now, try the following (synthesis): move the first image over the second, and merge them, as strange as it may seem, into a somewhat coherent picture; colour the picture not in the abominable grey of workshop venues over the world, but use the full palette of vibrant springtime colours; finally, for proper setting, add to the image a gorgeous fin-de-siècle villa in a Central European city. (Beer and goulash are optional, certainly welcome, but not necessary for the synthesis to succeed.)

Voilà, there is the Prague Colloquium for you, at least from my own, admittedly idiosyncratic perspective.

I have so far attended the event merely three times, at the kind and generous invitation of Alessandro Ferrara. Each time, however, I felt it represented a truly unique intellectual space that does not really have an equivalent anywhere else. It offers the ideal blend of intellectual engagement of the highest calibre within a collegial, supportive environment. The familiar side of the event is reflected in a general sentiment that all participants must have shared at some point: that we partake, somewhat diffusely, but still, in the same philosophical project; a project that is not completely articulated (yet), but that has some relatively stable, identifiable contours, which we attempt to draw out together each time we descend on Prague.

The Colloquium's deliberative climate can perhaps be best characterized by its low hierarchies, its internal diversity and its international orientation. The friendliness and openness of all the Directors is simply astonishing. They are not only there to facilitate debates by chairing the parallel panels, but actively shape the course of the entire Colloquium, perhaps most notably through their keynote talks, which often become reference points for ongoing discussions. These carefully selected and balanced keynotes have for me been the recurring highlights each year.

Prague is also, and inevitably, a place for contestation and dispute. Since Critical Theory seems to be, by definition, an open-ended project, there will be serious and continuous disagreement about the character of the project itself and its ultimate

purpose. Engaging with a wide range of positions and interests is hence another highly rewarding aspect of the Colloquium. During the days in Prague one can acquire a sense of the true size of this family, simply by listening to the different kinds of question that scholars from around the world are asking. It is in later months especially pleasing to find some of their answers published in the top journals of our discipline.

In sum, Prague provides for me a forum where new ideas can be tested against a broad-minded, diverse and sophisticated audience that is critical in the best possible way. May the synthesis continue to thrive!